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ABSTRACT

Focus group discussions were held to determine the perceptions of 8 male and 28 female adult students regarding the quality of their undergraduate evening program at a medium-sized public liberal arts college. The students voluntarily participated in one of three group sessions at which the following topics were discussed: whether evening students are considered as important as students attending classes during the day, primary concerns as an evening student, steps the college can take to strengthen course offerings and scheduling for evening students, and the ideal college experience for evening students. The students were selected so as to provide a group that was representative of the evening student population from the standpoints of age, gender, class rank, and major. The students' main concerns were related to the lack of upper-level courses, the need for more course variety, and scheduling overlaps. Among additional issues and concerns raised were the following: availability of advisors, access to facilities, and visibility of security. The adult students were more interested in being able to enroll in the courses required for their degrees than in being able to participate in "typical" campus activities. Most students considered their experiences as evening students positive, and most found the faculty responsive. Contains 7 references. (MN)

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Assessing Undergraduate Curriculum for the Adult Learner: Focus Group Research

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Abstract

Focus group research was conducted to evaluate student perceptions of the quality of an undergraduate evening program. One purpose was to provide information to the newly appointed Director of Adult Learning. This method solicited detailed student input replicating and expanding results of an earlier survey while allowing for new topics to be included. Four general questions were presented to direct the areas of discussion: (1) Do you feel that your are as important as students who attend classes during the day? (2) What are your primary concerns as an evening student? (3) What can the college do to strengthen course offerings and scheduling for evening students? (4) What should the college experience be for an evening student? The moderator followed a flexible outline of specific issues within each question. There were 36 student volunteers who each participated in one of three sessions. These students primarily attended classes held after 3:00 p.m. They were matched as closely as possible on the dimensions of age, gender, class rank and major to the evening population in order to obtain a representative sample. Since this is not a statistical approach, analyses centered on discerning group perceptions. The primary areas of concern were course related including the lack of upper level courses, the need for more course variety and scheduling overlaps. Additional issues raised were availability of advisors, access to facilities, visibility of security, inadequate lighting and lack of parking. In addition, students indicated that rather than being interested in "typical" campus activities, their focus was strictly on being able to enroll in the courses required for their degrees. Although there were relevant problems presented, students saw their overall experience as a positive one. They cited that the faculty was responsive, the atmosphere was mature and classes were smaller allowing for more interaction.

Assessing Undergraduate Curriculum for the Adult Learner:

Focus Group Research

In order to respond to changes in the college constituency, it is essential to reevaluate curriculum and resources. The over 25 year old "new majority" (Cohen, 1993) is appearing in increasing numbers on our campuses. According to The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (1991), 63.6 percent of all college students fall within this majority. This group is extremely diverse. Many are self-supporting, part-time students who frequently attend night classes. As this population enrolls in college classes in higher and higher numbers, colleges are faced with the task of adapting their evening programs and adjusting services provided.

To assist in identifying and addressing the specific needs of this growing nontraditional population, it is important to gather information from the students themselves. Previous survey research (McCormick, 1992) indicated that a paradigm shift was necessary in order to identify the perspective of the new majority. Survey results suggested that more focused and detailed input be obtained from evening students directly. Rather than limiting data to yes and no survey responses, a method to discern specific concerns would be more appropriate. The focus group design, cited as an assessment method in the APA report on undergraduate education (McGovern, 1993), was selected as the method of choice. Focus group research would allow for the replication of the quantitative results of the survey while further evaluating specific student perceptions of the

evening program.

The focus group method is a form of exploratory research used to discover ideas and insights (Selltiz, Wrightsman, & Cook, 1986). Focus groups developed from structured interviews. Focus group research involves conducting a personal interview among a small group of individuals simultaneously. The purpose is to stimulate and promote interaction among the participants. Group discussion exposes all the subjects to each other's impressions generating new ideas and insights. The purpose is to break vague problem areas into smaller, more precise subproblems (Churchill, 1991). Discussion is directed by a moderator who follows a flexible outline of explicit issues within a broad framework of general questions (Greenbaum, 1988). Group members serve as representatives of the overall population of interest. It was predicted that a focus group study would replicate earlier findings regarding students' general concerns while identifying specific needs that could each be addressed in an effort to improve the quality of the evening program.

Method

Subjects

The participants were 28 female and 8 male students who primarily attend classes after 3:00 p.m. at a medium size, public, liberal arts college. The mean age of the subjects was 31.75 (SD = 6.01). Information regarding class rank provided by the students indicated that 8 were in their first year, 10 were sophomores, 12

were juniors and 6 were in their senior year. In terms of their majors, 17 were in the health professions, 12 in arts and sciences and 7 in education.

The students were recruited for the focus groups through printed flyers, announcements in evening classes by faculty and individual solicitation. Each student contacted the experimenter directly and took part in the study voluntarily. The three sessions were held on different days of the week at varied times during the late afternoons and evenings over a four week period. This was done in order to maximize availability to a wide variety of participants. There were 14 students at the first session, 18 at the second and 4 at the third.

Apparatus

A four question outline was designed through the collaboration of the experimenter and the Director of Nontraditional Learning (see Appendix A). The results of the Evening Student Survey conducted previously were used as a starting point. The questions were all written to be general, open ended and directed towards broad topics. The outline itself included more specific issues towards which the conversation could be directed as needed. This process was utilized in order to insure that all sessions covered the same basic format, while allowing for new information to be gathered.

The first question was written so as to reveal the students' basic positions and establish their general feelings about the program. This starting point was an essential element in setting the context for the sessions. The intent was also to

move beyond a check list of yes and no responses right at the beginning of the sessions and to encourage open discussion. The remaining questions were primarily informational. The same outline was utilized by the moderator to guide the discussions under the same format during all three sessions. The only other equipment necessary was a tape recorder used to make an accurate record of the proceedings.

Procedure

After the question outline was developed, three separate focus group sessions were planned in order to attempt to cover all types of evening students. The volunteers were recruited and assigned to a session by the experimenter. Reminder telephone contacts were made just prior to each session. Extreme care was taken to obtain a sample representative of the universe of evening students. In this case, the operational definition was that the participants primarily take classes that are held after 3:00 p.m. Assignment to each of the focus groups was made in such a way as to align the groups as closely as possible to the evening population on four indicators. The indicators were age, gender, class rank and major.

The same basic format was followed at all three sessions. At the beginning of each session, introductory remarks and instructions were presented by the moderator. Rapport with the participants was established and an open environment was created in order to encourage participation. The students were informed that the purpose for their involvement was the collection of detailed

input regarding their needs as evening students. The rules established were that the moderator would facilitate the discussion and that everyone would participate. The record keeping and taping policies were explained and permission was obtained for participation. These procedures were carried out in such a way as to maintain confidentiality.

The moderator guided the interview according to the question outline directing the areas of discussion rather than the thinking of the participants. The students led the discussion towards the issues most relevant to them. Everyone in the session contributed their own ideas and everyone was exposed to each other's point of view. Students were encouraged to consider and comment on other participants' responses. As needed, the discussion was controlled so that no one person dominated the conversation and repetition of the same information was avoided. Each session was conducted in a classroom and lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Results

Since focus group research is not a statistical approach, analyses centered on evaluating the student indicators and discerning group perceptions. The focus groups were compared to the evening student population on the basis of age, gender, class rank and major. Since the college's data digest does not provide detailed information on evening students, the values for the indicators were obtained from the earlier survey of all evening students. Comparisons were made

between the focus group and the survey participants on the four indicators.

The average age of the focus group students was 31.8 (SD = 6.01) years. The average age of the survey students was 31.8 (SD = 8.4) years (See Figure 1). In terms of gender, the focus groups combined were 22% male and 78% female. The survey participants were 28% male and 72% female (See Figure 2). The third indicator was college major. Because of the wide range of majors, they were reported according to schools within the college. The focus groups had 33% arts and sciences majors, 47% health professions majors and 19% education majors. Survey results revealed that 35% were arts and sciences majors, 34% were from health professions and 24% from education (See Figure 3). Class rank was the last indicator. The focus sessions had a composition of 22% freshman, 28% sophomores, 33% juniors, and 17% seniors. The data from the survey indicated that 43% of the evening students were freshmen, 22% sophomores, 16% juniors and 11% seniors (See Figure 4).

Perceptions of the focus group evening students will be presented according to the general topic addressed. Students indicated that they themselves felt as important as day students, but believed that the college saw them as an after thought. Services and programs were geared to day students. Evening students tended to be on the short end of services offered and felt that their needs often fell between the cracks. On the positive side, those students who had been enrolled for several years had noticed a recent improvement in the overall program. They

attributed these changes to the new Director of Nontraditional Learning. The addition of weekend classes was seen as one of the most helpful additions.

The primary area of concern was course related. Specific issues were limited course offerings focusing on a lack of upper level courses, scheduling overlaps of required courses and the inability to complete degree programs. Course needs centered on increasing science offerings including physical science and anatomy. Students said that even when courses are made available at night, waiting for the course to be offered in rotation held them back. There was also a problem of not being able to take prerequisites prior to required courses. Many students had difficulties completing specific degrees due to insufficient course offerings. Students were found to be selecting their majors based upon majors offered at night rather than on personal choice.

Several other specific problems were raised. Evening students found it difficult to access facilities including the cafeteria, the book store, administrative offices, and the science, language, math and computer laboratories. Students requested more visible security especially in the parking areas and in the quad. The need for more lighting throughout the campus was cited with specific concerns about the main quad and the parking area near the tennis courts. Difficulty locating parking spaces was also discussed. It was mentioned that many faculty spaces are vacant after 5:00 p.m., but not available to students. Another primary concern for many students was the availability financial aid eligibility. There was a sincere interest in

more two and three credit-hour courses being offered. It was also suggested that there was a definite lack of access to healthy foods. Students often drive directly to class from work and remain on campus until as late as 10:30 p.m. Finally, one of the main problems cited was communications. Requests for more effective ways of getting information out to evening students was discussed. A popular suggestion was electronic bulletin boards.

In terms of affirmative comments, the students indicated that they also had very positive feelings about being an evening student. Specifically, they mentioned an overall positive perception of the faculty and the quality of instruction. They felt that the faculty was responsive to their needs, that the atmosphere was more mature and that the classes were smaller allowing for more interactions. The students, in general, stated that they were not concerned about "typical" campus activities. Their focus was strictly on being able to enroll in the courses they needed to obtain their degrees. Networking was viewed as a part of the college experience which they highly valued.

Discussion

Caution is necessary in interpreting these results because focus group research is a non-statistical approach. In this case, participants served as representatives of the universe of evening students. Since extreme effort was taken to match the focus groups on the four indicators (two indicators is generally acceptable), it is hoped that the perceptions of these participants match the perceptions of the

evening population as a whole. The least we can say is that several persons in the universe of evening students stated particular concerns. The most we can say is that due to the care taken in conducting this research, the results indicate the perceptions of evening students on the whole. In addition, it is important to be aware of the fact that the results indicate the experimenter's ability to look for patterns and to discern the sense of the group. To confirm these patterns, the Director of Nontraditional Learning participated in each session.

One advantage to this method is that specific issues identified by this process could be further investigated using a more quantitative approach. Fortunately, that was the case with this project. Based upon overwhelmingly positive support from the focus groups for a revision of the evening schedule, a specific survey was circulated to test overall evening student response to the proposal. The survey replicated the focus groups' feedback and the proposal has now been submitted to faculty. This process also reinforced the concept that the focus groups represented the evening population.

There were two issues relevant to conducting similar projects in the future. First, a change might be made in timing. As the end of the quarter approached, participation decreased. This is typical for any campus project or activity. Earlier scheduling could have allowed for a more equal number of participants at each session. Second, last minute absences and substitutions may have altered the representativeness of the sample. But considering that this research used

volunteers, it is believed the results are as accurate as possible.

The information accumulated from this research was directly available to the newly appointed Director of Nontraditional Learning as he was a participant in the sessions. As an administrator, the Director relayed the concerns to the college's deans and department heads. The results are now being utilized to enhance and improve evening courses and services. In addition, the findings of this research replicated and refined findings of the earlier survey especially in the areas of course offerings, positive evaluation of the faculty and lighting and security needs. An additional benefit was that the volunteers were introduced to the Director on a one to one basis. Hopefully, the students are now aware of the presence of an administrator to whom they can address their problems. This meeting also solved the issue of lack of contact with the administration raised by the original survey.

This project achieved its research objectives. It validated the results of the quantitative data from the survey and it determined the specific issues about which students were concerned. The focus group method was successful in allowing for open, unstructured research. Through this approach, the students determined what was important to them rather than ranking the issues that the experimenter felt were important as in the survey research. This study addressed the "paradigm shift". Rather than being a day student who attends classes at a later time, the evening student has unique needs and concerns. The results of this research have direct application. The concerns of the "new majority" are being presented to those

who are responsible for improving the evening program. As the issues are addressed, the next research step might be to investigate how to implement the proposed changes.

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